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ESSENCE OF THE DUSK.

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ESSENCE OF THE DUSK

(अहिपीदितानन्दिका)

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT

BY

F. W. BAIN

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अहो विषाद्प्यधिकाः स्त्रियो रूपविमानिताः

Love turns venom, now I see,
Flouted Beauties vipers be.

James Parker and Co.,
31 BEDFORD-STREET, STRAND, LONDON;

Parker and Son,
27 BROAD-STREET, OXFORD.

1906.

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DEDICATED

TO THE

OTHER SEX.

PREFACE.

MORE generally known, perhaps, than any other Hindoo legend, is the story of the demon, RÁHU, who brings about ECLIPSES, by devouring the Sun and Moon. For when the gods had upchurned the nectar, the delectable Butter of the Brine, Ráhu's mouth watered at the very sight of it: and "in the guise of a god" he mingled unperceived among them, to partake. But the Sun and Moon, the watchful Eyes of Night and Day, detected him, and told Wishnu, who cast at him his discus, and cut his body from his head: but not until the nectar was on the way down his throat. Hence though the body died, the head became immortal: and ever since, a thing unique, "no body and all head," a byword among philosophers, he takes revenge on Sun and Moon, the great Taletellers, by "gripping" them in his horrid jaws, and holding on, till he is tired, or can be persuaded to let go. Hence, in some parts of India, the doleful shout of the country people at eclipses: *Chor do! chor do*[a]! and hence, also, the primary and surface meaning of our title: *A Digit of the Moon in the Demon's grip:* in plain English, *an eclipse of the moon.* And yet,

[a] *Let go! let go!*

legend though it be, there is something in the old mythological way of putting the case, which describes the situation in eclipses, far better than our arid scientific prose. I shall not easily forget, how, as we slid like ghosts at midnight, through the middle of the desert, along the Suez Canal [b], I watched the ghastly pallor of the wan unhappy moon, as the horrible shadow crept slowly over her face, stealing away her beauty, and turning the lone and level sands that stretched away below to a weird and ashy blue, as though covering the earth with a sepulchral sympathetic pall. For we caught the "griesly terror," Ráhu, at his horrid work, towards the end of May, four years ago.

But our title has yet another meaning underneath the first, for *Ahi*, the name employed for Ráhu (like all other figures in Indian mythology, he is known by many names), also means a *snake*. *Beauty persecuted by a snake* is the subject of the story. That story will presently explain itself: but the relation between *Ráhu*, or eclipses, and a snake is so curiously illustrated by a little insignificant occurrence that happened to myself, that the reader will doubtless forgive me for making him acquainted with it.

[b] Though nothing can be less romantic than a canal, gliding through that of Suez is a strange experience at night. Your great ship seems to move, swift and noiseless, through the very sand: and if only you could get there without knowing where you were, you would think that you were dreaming.

Being at Delhi, not many years ago, I seized the opportunity to visit the Kutub Minár. There was famine in the land. At every station I had passed upon the way were piled the hides of bullocks, and from the train you might see their skeletons lying, each one bleaching where it died for want of fodder, scattered here and there on the brown and burning earth; for even every river bed was waterless, and not a single blade of green could you descry, for many hundred miles. And hence it came about, that as I gazed upon the two emaciated hacks that were to pull me from the station, a dozen miles out, and as many more back, I could bring myself to sit behind them only by the thought that thereby I should save them from a load far greater than my own, that would have been their fate on my refusal. Therefore we started, and did ultimately arrive, in the very blaze of noon.

The Kutab Minár is a needle of red stone, that rises from a plain as flat as paper to a height of two hundred and fifty feet; and you might compare it, as you catch, approaching, glimpses of it at a distance, to a colossal chimney, a Pharos, or an Efreet of the Jinn. The last would be the best. For nothing on the surface of the earth can parallel the scene of desolation which unrols itself below, if you climb its 380 steps and look out from the dizzy verge: a thing that will test both the muscle of your knees and the steadiness of your nerves. Round you is empty space: look down, the pillar bends

and totters, and you seem to rock in air; you shudder, you are falling: and away, away below, far as the eye can carry, you see the dusty plain, studded with a thousand tombs and relics of forgotten kings. There is the grim old fortress of the Toghlaks: there is the singular observatory of the rájá astronomer, Jaya Singh: and there the tomb, Humaioon's tomb, before which Hodson, Hodson the brave, Hodson the slandered, Hodson the unforgotten, sat, for two long hours, still, as if man and horse were carved in stone, with the hostile crowd that loathed and feared him tossing and seething and surging round him, waiting for the last Mogul to come out and be led away. The air is thick, and sparkles with blinding dust and glare, and the wind whistles in your ears. Over the bones of dynasties, the hot wind wails and sobs and moans. Aye! if a man seeks for melancholy, I will tell him where to find it—at the top of the old Kutub Minár.

And then, that happened which I had forseeen. We had not gone a mile upon our homeward way, when one of the horses fell. Therefore, disregarding the asseverations of my rascally Jehu that the remaining animal was fully equal to the task alone, I descended, and proceeded on foot. But a ten mile walk on the Delhi plain in the hottest part of the day is not a thing to be recommended. After plodding on for about two hours, I was, like Langland, "wery forwandred," and went me to rest, not

alas! by a burnside, but in the shadow of one of the innumerable little tombs that stand along the dusty road. There I lay down and fell asleep.

Nothing induces slumber like exertion under an Indian sun. When I awoke, that sun was setting. A little way before me, the yellow walls of Delhi were bathed in a ruddy glow; the minarets of the Great Mosque stood out sharp against the clear unspotted amber sky. And as I watched them, I suddenly became aware that I was myself observed with interest by a dusky individual, who was squatted just in front of me, and who rose, salaaming, when he saw that I was awake. It appeared that I had, so to say, fallen into a "nest of vipers;" that I had unwittingly invaded the premises of a snake dealer, who, no doubt for solid reasons, had made my friendly tomb the temporary repository of his stock-in-trade.

The Indian snake charmer, *gáruda*, *hawadiga* [c], or whatever else they call him, is as a rule but a poor impostor. He goes about with one fangless cobra, one rock snake, and one miserable mongoose, strangling at the end of a string. My dweller in tombs was richer than all his tribe in his snakes, and in his eyes. I have never seen anybody else with real cat's eyes! eyes with exactly that greenish yellow luminous glare which you see when you look at a cat in the dark. They gleamed and rolled in the evening sun, over a row of shining teeth, as their

[c] *Háwa*, in Canarese, is the name of Ráhu.

owner squatted down before me, liberating one after another from little bags and baskets an amazing multitude of snakes, which he fetched in batches from the interior of the tomb, till the very ground seemed alive with them[d]. Some of them he handled only with the greatest respect, and by means of an iron prong. Outside the Zoo (where they lose in effect) I never saw so many together before: and it is only when you see a number of these reptiles together that you realise what a strange uncanny being, after all, is a snake: and as you watch him, lying, as it were, in wait, beautiful exceedingly, but with a beauty that inspires you with a shudder, his eyes full of cruelty and original sin, and his tongue of calumny and malice, you begin to understand his influence in all religions. I was wholly absorbed in their snaky evolutions, and buried in mythological reminiscences, when my *gáruda* roused me suddenly, by saying: *Huzoor*, look!

He leaned over, and administered with his bare hand a vicious dig to a magnificent hamadryad, that lay coiled upon itself in its open basket. The creature instantly sat up, with a surge of splendid passion, hissing, bowing, and expanding angrily its great tawny hood. The *gáruda* put his *púngí* to his lips, and blew for a while upon it

[d] I did not count them, but there were several dozen, nearly all different. I have reason to believe that this man must have been one of the disciples of a former very celebrated snake charmer, who was known all over India.

a low and wheezy drone,—the invariable prelude to a little *jadoo*, or black art,—which the beautiful animal appeared to appreciate: and then, pointing with the end of his pipe to the "spectacles" on its hood, he said, with that silky, insinuating smile which is characteristic of the scamp: *Huzoor, dekho, namas karta*[e]:—

Nágki phani, chánd ka dúkh
Uski badi, áp ka súkh[f].

I did not understand his lunar allusion, but, judging that his rhyming gibberish, like that of the rascally priests in Apuleius, was a carefully prepared oracle of general application, kept in stock for the cozening of such prey as myself, I repeated to him my favourite Hindu proverb[g], and gave him, in exchange for his benevolent cheque on the future, a more commonplace article of present value, which led to our parting on the most amicable terms. But I did him injustice, perhaps. Long afterwards, having occasion to consult an astronomical chart, with reference to this very story, all at once I started, and in an instant, the golden evening, the

[e] *See, he makes obeisance.*

[f] Which we may roughly render: *Hood of snake brings joy and rue, this to moon and that to you.* In all Oriental saws, jingle counts for much.

[g] "*Tulsi, in this world hobnob with everybody: for you never know in what guise the deity may present himself.*" In the original it is a rhyming stanza.

walls of Delhi, and my friend of the many snakes and sinister eyes, suddenly rose up again into my mind. For there, staring at me out of the chart, was the mark on the cobra's head. It is the sign still used in modern astronomy for "the head and tail of the dragon," the nodes indicating the point of occultation, the symbol of eclipse.

What then induced or inspired the *gáruda* to connect me with the moon? Was it really black art, divination, or was it only a coincidence? Reason recommends the latter alternative: and yet, the contrary persuasion is not without its charm. Who knows? It may be, that the soul grows to its atmosphere as well as the body, and living in a land where dreams are realities, and all things are credible, and history is only a fairy tale: the land of the moon and the lotus and the snake, old gods and old ruins, former births, second sight, and idealism: it falls back, unconsciously mesmerised, under the spell of forgotten creeds.

POONA,
April, 1906.

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A Haunted Beauty.

May that triumphant Lord protect us, who as he stands in mysterious meditation, bathed in twilight, motionless, and ashy pale[a], *with the crystal moon in his yellow hair, appears to the host of worshippers on his left, a woman, and to those on his right, a man.*

THERE lived of old, on the edge of the desert, a rájá of the race of the sun. And like that sun reflected at midday in the glassy depths of the Mánasa lake, he had an image of himself in the form of a son[b], who exactly resembled him in every particular, except age. And he gave him the name of Aja, for he said: He is not another, but my very self that has conquered death, and passed without birth straight over into another body. Moreover, he will resemble his ancestor, and the god after whom

[a] Being actually smeared with ashes. The god is of course Shiwa, and the allusion is to his *Ardhanárí*, or half male, half female form.

[b] This punning assonance is precisely in the vein of the original.

I have called him Aja[c]. So as this son grew up, his father's delight in him grew greater also. For he was tall as a *shála* tree, and very strong, and yet like another God of Love: for his face was more beautiful than the face of any woman, with large eyes like lapis-lazuli, and lips like laughter incarnate: so that his father, as often as he looked at him, said to himself: Surely the Creator has made a mistake, and mixed up his male and female ingredients, and made him half and half. For if only he had had a twin sister, it would have been difficult to tell with certainty, which was which.

And then, when Aja was eighteen, his father died. And immediately, his relations conspired against him, led by his maternal uncle. And they laid a plot, and seized him at night, and bound him when he was asleep: for they dared not attack him when he was awake, for fear of his courage and his prodigious strength. And they deliberated over him, as he lay bound, what they should do with him: and some of them were for putting him to death,

[c] This name (pronounce Aj- to rhyme with *trudge*) meaning both *unborn* and *a goat*, is a name of the sun (who was a goat in Assyria), the soul, Brahma, Wishnu, Shiwa, the God of Love, and others. It was also the name of Rama's grandfather.

then and there. But the prime minister, who was in the plot, persuaded them to let him live: saying to himself: In this way I shall make for myself a loophole of escape, in case he should ever regain his throne.

Then in the early morning, his uncle and his other relations took him away, and laid him bound on a swift camel. And mounting others, they hurried him away into the desert, going at full speed for hours, till they reached its very heart. And there they set him down. And they placed beside him a little water in a small skin, and a little bag of corn. And his uncle said: Now, O nephew, we will leave thee, alone with thy shadow and thy life in the sand. And if thou canst save thyself, by going away to the western quarter, lo! it is open before thee. But beware of attempting to return home, towards the rising sun. For I will set guards to watch thy coming, and I will not spare thee a second time.

And then, he set his left arm free, and laid beside him a little knife. And they mounted their camels, and taking his, they flew away from him over the sand, like the shadow of a cloud driven by the western wind.

So when they were gone, Aja took the knife, and cut his bonds. And he stood up, and watched them going, till they became specks on the edge of the desert, and vanished out of his sight.

II.

THEN he looked round to the eight quarters of the world, and he looked up into the sky. And he said to himself: There is my ancestor, alone above, and I am alone, below. And he put his two hands to his breast, and flung them out into the air. And he exclaimed: Bho! ye guardians of the world[d], ye are my witnesses. Thus do I fling away the past, and now the whole wide world is mine, and ye are my protectors. And I have escaped death by a miracle, and the craft of that old villain of a prime minister, whom I will one day punish as he deserves. And now it is as though I knew, for the very first time in all my life, what it was to be alive. Ha!

[d] The *Lokapálas*, or regents of the world, often thus appealed to, are eight: Kubera, Isha, Indra, Agni, Yama, Niruti, Waruna, and Wayu: and they ride on a horse, a bull, an elephant, a ram, a buffalo, a man, a "crocodile," and a stag.

I live and breathe, and there before me is food and water. And now we will see, which is the stronger: Death in the form of this lonely desert, or the life that laughs at his menace as it dances in my veins. And little I care for the loss of my kingdom, now that my father is dead and gone. I throw it away like a blade of grass, and so far from lamenting, I feel rather as if I had been born again. Ha! it is good to be alive, even in this waste of sand. And he shouted aloud, and called out to the sun above him: Come, old Grandfather, thou and I will travel together across the sand. And yet, no. Thou art too rapid and too fierce to be a safe companion, even for one of thy own race. So thou shalt go before me, as is due to thee, and I will follow after.

And then, he lay down on the sand, covering his head with his upper garment, and slept and waited all day long, till the sun was going down. And then he rose, and eat and drank a very little, and taking with him his skin and corn, he walked on after the sun, which sank to his rest in the western mountain. But Aja followed him all night long, with the moon for his only companion. And as he went, he saw the bones of men and

camels, lying along the sand, and grinning at him as it were with white and silent laughter, as though to say: Anticipate thy fate: for but a little further on, and thou shalt be what we are now. But he went on with nimble feet, like one that hurries through the den of a sleeping hungry lion, till the sun rose at last behind him. And then again he lay down, and rested all day long, and started again at night. And so he proceeded for many days, till all his water and corn was gone. And as he threw away the skin, he set his teeth, and said: No matter. I will reach the end of this hideous sand, which like the dress of Draupadi[e], seems to roll itself out as I go across it, though I should have to go walking on long after I am dead.

And night after night he went on, growing every night a little weaker. And then at last there came a night when as he toiled along with heavy steps that flagged as it were with loaded feet, faint with hunger and burning thirst, he said to himself: I am nearly spent, and now the end is coming near, either of the sand, or me. And

[e] When she was lost in the gambling match, and Duhshásana tried to strip her, still as he pulled off one dress, another appeared below it, refusing to leave her naked.

then the sun rose behind him, and he looked up, and lo! it was reflected from the wall of a city before him, which resembled another sun of hope rising in the west to cheer him. And he rubbed his eyes, and looked again, saying to himself: Is it a delusion of the desert, to mock me as I perish, or is it really a true city? And he said again: Ha! it is a real city. And his ebbing strength came back to him with a flood of joy. And he stooped, and took up a little sand, and turned, and threw it back, exclaiming: Out upon thee, abode of death[1]! Now, then, I have beaten thee, and thy victim will after all escape. And he hurried on towards the city, half afraid to take his eyes away from it for a single instant, lest it should disappear.

So as he drew near it, he saw a crowd upon its wall. And when he was distant from it but a little way, suddenly its great gate's mouth was thrown open, and a stream of people shot from it like a long tongue, and rapidly came towards him, so that he said to himself: Ha! then, as it seems, I am expected by the citizens of this delightful city, who are as eager to come to me as I am to get

[1] Still the name of Marwar.

to them. And they came closer, clamouring and buzzing as it were like bees; and he looked, and lo! they were all women, and there was not a man among them all. And as he wondered, they ran up, and reached him, and threw themselves upon him like a wave of the sea, laughing and crying, and drowning him in their embraces: and they took him as it were captive, and swept him away towards the city, all talking at once, and deafening him with their joyful exclamations, paying not the least attention to anything that he tried to say. And Aja let himself go, carried away by all those women like a leaf in a rushing stream. And he said to himself, in astonishment: What is this great wonder? For all these women fight for me, as if they had never seen a man in their lives before. Where then can the men be, to whom they must belong? Or can it be, that I have come to a city composed of women without a man? Have I escaped the desert, only to be drowned in a sea of women? For what is the use of a single man, in an ocean of the other sex? Or are they dragging me away to offer me up to the Mother[g], having sacrificed all their own husbands

[g] Durgá or Párwatí.

already? Or have I really died in the desert, and is all this only a dream of the other world? Can these be the heavenly Apsarases, come in a body to fetch me away, as if I had fallen in battle? Surely they are, for some of them are sufficiently beautiful even for Indra's hall. And anyhow, it is better to be torn to pieces by beautiful women, even if there are far too many, than to die in the desert, all alone.

So as they bore him along, chattering on like jays and cranes, he said again to the women next him: Fair ones, who are you, and where are you taking me, and why in the world are you so greatly delighted to see me? And then at last, they replied: O handsome stranger, ask nothing: very soon thou shalt know all, for we are carrying thee away to our King. And Aja said to himself: Ha! So, then, there is a King. These women have, after all, a King. Truly, I am fain to see him, this singular King of a female city. And weak as he was, he began to laugh, as they all were laughing: and so they all surged on like a very sea of laughter, through the gates of the city, and along the streets within, till they came at last to the King's palace. And all the way, Aja looked, and there was not

to be seen so much as the shadow of a man in all the streets, which overflowed with women like the channel of a river in the rainy season.

Then the guards of the palace doors, who were also women, took him, and led him in; and all the women who had brought him crowded in behind. And they mounted stairs, and after a while, they entered at last a great hall, whose pillars of alabaster were reflected in its dark green crystal floor, giving it the semblance of a silent pool in which a multitude of colossal swans had buried their necks beneath the water. And there Aja found himself in the presence of the King.

And instantly, all the women screamed together: Victory to thee, Maharájá! for here have we brought thee another husband for thy lovely daughter. And Aja started. And he said to himself: Another husband! How many husbands, then, has this strange King's daughter got already? Has she an insatiable thirst for husbands, whose number I am brought to swell? So as he stood reflecting, the King leaped from his throne, and came towards him. And as Aja looked at him, he was seized with amazement greater than before. For the King resembled a very incarnation of the essence of

grief, yet such, that it was difficult to behold him without laughter, as if the Creator had made him to exhibit skill in combining the two. For his long thin hair was pure white, as if with sorrow, and his eyes were red, as if with weeping, and great hollow ruts were furrowed in his sunk and withered cheeks, as if the tears had worn themselves channels in which to run. And though he was tall, he was bent and old, as if bowed down by a load of care. And he tried, as if in vain, to smile, as he said in a mournful voice that quavered and cracked: O man, whoever thou art, long have I waited for thee, and glad indeed I am to see thee, and inclined to dance like a peacock at the sight of a rainy cloud.

And as he gazed upon the King, Aja was seized with sudden laughter that would not be controlled: saying within himself: Much in common they have between them, a dancing happy peacock, and this doleful specimen of a weeping King! And he laughed, till tears ran down his cheeks also, as if in imitation of those of the King. And when at last he could speak, he said: O King, forgive me. For I am very weak, and have come within a little of dying in the desert. And I laughed from sheer ex-

haustion, and for joy to see in thy person as it were the warrant of my escape from death. Give me food, and above all, water, if thou wouldst not have me die at thy feet. And afterwards, show me, if thou wilt, thy daughter, to whom, as it seems, I am to be married, whether I will or no. And the King said: O thou model of the Creator's cunning in the making of man, thy hilarity is excused. Food thou shalt have, and water, and everything else thou canst require, and that immediately. But as for my daughter, there she is before thee. And she could teach dancing even to Tumburu himself[h].

III.

AND then, as the laughter surged again in Aja's soul, saying within himself: Out on this pitiable old scarecrow of a King, whose only thought is dancing! the King turned, and stood aside. And Aja looked, and instantly, the laughter died out

[h] A Ghandarwa, or heavenly musician, and the dancing master of the Apsarases. [Pronounce tum- to rhyme with *room*, rather short.]

of his heart, which ceased as it were to beat. And he murmured to himself: Ha! this is the most wonderful thing of all. King and women and desert and all vanished out of his mind, as if the sentiment that suddenly seized it filled it so completely as to leave room for nothing else. And he stood still gazing, feeling as though he were spinning round, though he was standing still as death. For there before him stood this enigmatical King's daughter. And like her father, she also seemed an incarnation of the soul of grief, not as in his case ignominious, and an object of derision, but rather resembling a heavenly drug, compounded of the camphor of the cold and midnight moon, that had put on a fragrant form of feminine and fairy beauty to drive the world to sheer distraction, half with love and half with woe. For like the silvery vision of the new-born streak of that Lord of Herbs, she was slender and pale and wan, formed as it seemed of some new strange essence of pure clear ice and new dropt snow, and she loomed on the soul of Aja out of the blackness of his trance like a large white drooping lily, just seen in the gloom of an inky night. And her hair and brow were the

colour of a thunder-cloud in the month of Chaitra[1], and like that cloud, the heavy sorrow hung in her great dark mournful eyes, drenching him as it were with a shower of dusky dreamy dewy beauty, and drawing him down bewitched and lost like the victim of a haunted pool into the snaky eddy of their silent unfathomable recess. And yet her deep red lips trembled, as it were on the very border of a smile, as if they were hinting against their will of a mine of laughter and subtle snares that they were not allowed to use. And she had risen up to come and meet him, yet was hanging back as if reluctant, and so she stood, all reflected in the polished floor, with her head thrown back to look at him, for she was very small, like one on the very point of imploring help, yet shrinking, as if too proud to ask it from a stranger, balanced as it were between reliance on her own pure and pleading beauty and doubtfulness of its reception. So she halted irresolute, with glorious throat that was hovering still over the swell of her lifted breasts, poised as it were on the very verge of tumultuous oscillation, like that of Rati, preparing with timidity to cast herself at the feet

[1] April.

of the three-eyed God, to beg back the body of her burned-up husband in a passion of love-lorn tears.

And Aja stood before her, like the sea when the digit of the moon rises suddenly over its waves, stirred with a tumult of strange emotions, and yet lit by a heavenly ray, a mass of agitated darkness mixed with dancing, trembling light; all unaware that he was himself to the King's daughter exactly what she was to him, a weapon of bewilderment in the hands of the cunning god of the flowery bow, who shot him suddenly at her, like an arrow of intoxication, and pierced her through the very middle of the soft lotus of her heart.

So they two stood awhile in silence. And all at once, Aja spoke, not knowing that he spoke aloud. And he said, very slowly: How many husbands, then, have already had this lustrous beauty, who looks for all as pure and pale and undefiled as a new young delicate jasmine bud? And instantly, as if roused from sleep by his reproach, he saw the colour leap up into her cheek, and spread like dawn flushing over her burning throat and brow. And she drew a sudden breath, and her bosom heaved abruptly as if with a sob of shame. And at that moment, the voice of the King her father broke harshly into

Aja's dream, saying: Alas! alas! Never a husband has had her yet, though she is now long past sixteen, and could even teach Tumburu dancing.

And then, as if the King's words had suddenly lifted a weight from his soul, Aja burst into a shout of laughter. And he tottered, as if to fall. And he caught at the old King's arm, and gripped it so that he almost screamed, exclaiming amid his laughter: Ha! King, I am also the son of a King: and now I will be thy son-in-law. And she shall have a husband at last, and teach him, if she pleases, dances, that even Tumburu does not know. And with that, he fell into such a paroxysm of laughter, that weak as he was, he could not stand, but fell: and his laughter turned to sobbing. Then the King's daughter turned to her father, with an angry flush on her brow. And she said, with strong emotion: O father, wilt thou delay for ever to send for food and water? Dost thou not see that this King's son, great and powerful though he be, is weak, and it may be, perishing, before thy face, of hunger and thirst, having escaped by a miracle out of the desert to die by thy neglect.

And she clapped her hands, stamping her foot

in indignation. Then the women ran, and took up Aja, and carried him away. And they bathed him, and tended him, and fed him till he was recovered: and after a while, they brought him back, into the presence of the King.

IV.

So he came once more into that hall, looking like another man. And he seemed in the eyes of the King like the rising sun of his daughter's marriage, but in those of his daughter like the very God of Love, newly risen from his own ashes. And he said joyously: O King, now I am again myself: and my reason and my strength have both again returned to me. And if in their absence, I behaved strangely and without good manners, it behoves thee to lay the blame rather on the desert of sand, that surrounds thy city, than on myself. For I was like one delirious, and half distracted, by wonder and other feelings coming to the aid of hunger and thirst. Then he told the King his name and family, and all his story, looking all the while at the King's daughter, as she did all the while at him, with glances that

resembled sighs. But as he watched her, Aja said to himself in wonder: What has happened to her, since I saw her first, and what is the matter with her, now? For her quiet grief has abandoned her, and she looks like one in a burning fever; and two red spots, like suns, burn and blaze upon her cheeks, and her great eyes shine and glow, as if there was a fire within her soul. So when he had finished his own tale, he said: Now, then, O King, I have told thee all that I have to tell. And now it is thy turn to speak. Explain to me all this wonder; for I seem to move in a maze of extraordinary events. Why are there, in thy city, no men, but only women? And what is the cause of thy grief? And, greatest wonder of all, how comes it that thou hast found a difficulty in finding a husband for this thy daughter? For, as for myself, know, that, make any terms thou wilt, I am ready to marry her, blindfold, on any conditions whatever: nay, would she only be my wife, I should consider the fruit of my birth attained.

And then, to his amazement, that strange old King began to weep once more. And tears flowed down his cheeks like rain, as he said: Alas! alas! O son-in-law that would be, so fine a man art thou, that

I am distressed indeed to see thee, and to hear thee so eagerly proposing to take my daughter for thy wife. For all that have preceded thee, and they were many hundreds, have said the very same: and yet all without exception have come to a miserable end: and there she is, unmarried still [k]. And yet this is no fault of hers, unless indeed it be a fault to be beautiful beyond compare. Nor has her maiden purity been sullied in the least degree by ever a suitor of them all. But all this has come about by reason of a fault of mine, itself, beyond a doubt, the bitter fruit of the tree of crimes committed in a former birth. For know, that long ago, when I was young, I conquered the entire earth, and brought it all, from sea to sea, under the shadow of one umbrella. So when I was reposing, after my exertions, one day there came to see me Nárada and another *rishi*. And Nárada entered first. And when he complimented me, as the chosen husband of the earth, I said to myself: Now, I must make him some suitable return. And accordingly, I pre-

[k] It may not be superfluous to remind the English reader, that, according to Hindoo ideas, there is no disgrace like that of possessing an unmarried daughter. Hence the practice, among the Rajpoots and adjacent peoples, of destroying the female infants, to avoid it.

sented him with the whole earth. Then he replied: O King, what is the use of the earth to me? And he gave it back to me, with his blessing, saying: Obtain an incomparably beautiful offspring[l]! and so he went away. And then the other great *rishi* entered, and congratulated me also. And I presented him also with the entire earth. Then that *rishi* looked at me with eyes that were red with anger. And he said slowly: What! Is my merit utterly despised? Dost thou presume to offer me only the leavings of another? Thou shalt indeed obtain offspring, but only of the female sex. And beautiful it shall be indeed: but little shall that beauty profit either thyself or her. So having uttered his curse[m], he laughed, and instantly went away, refusing to be propitiated or to throw any light upon the future. And thereafter in due time there was born to me,

[l] Intending, of course, a son. Unfortunately he employed a word of indeterminate gender: hence the lamentable *dénouement*. For in ancient India, as in ancient Rome, the *spoken word*, the letter, determined everything.

[m] Nothing in Hindoo mythology is more absurd than the implacable fury of the most holy men for the most trifling slights, unless it be the accuracy with which their most dreadful imprecations are literally fulfilled. This was, I believe, characteristic also of the saints of Erin.

not the nectar of a son, but this lump of grief in the form of a daughter. And as if her sex were not enough [n], her almost inconceivable beauty and accomplishments have only added to my calamity: nay, they are the very root of it, and the essence of its sting. For all has come to pass, exactly as that testy old *rishi* said. For though she is, as thou seest, beautiful as the moon, and like it, full of arts [o], and above all, a dancer that would turn even Tumburu green with envy, all this nectar has become poison by the curse of that old ascetic, and the very perfection of her beauty has become the means of undoing us both. For about two years ago, as we were walking together at midnight, on the terrace of the palace, that forms the edge of the city wall, enjoying the cold camphor of the moon after the heat of a burning day, suddenly, out of the desert, we heard as it were the rush of wings. And as we stood and listened, there arose in the air

[n] An English lady having called, not long ago, at the house of a Hindoo lady, to enquire how she was, after an interesting event, and *what was the result*, received for answer: Alas, *memsahib*, *nothing at all:* a girl. Had she been a partisan of "woman's rights," she would probably never have recovered from the shock.

[o] A play on words, not transferable to English.

a sound of voices, like those of a man and woman in vehement dispute. But though we could distinguish the tones, we could not understand the meaning, for the language was unknown to us. And then, after a while, those two invisible air-goers appeared all at once before our eyes, seated on the battlements, in the form of a pair of vultures [p]. And immediately, the male vulture spoke with a human voice, saying: O King, give me now this daughter of thine to wife. And instantly I answered rashly: Never will I bestow my daughter on a bird of ill-omen such as thou art. Thereupon that evil-minded suitor laughed like a hyæna: and instantly my daughter fell into a swoon. And as she lay in the moonlight, she looked so indescribably and unutterably beautiful, that even that loathsome bird was moved. And he said to his companion: Daughter, I was right, and thou wert wrong. Look, and see, and allow, that she is far more beautiful than even thou art. Thereupon that *gridhri* [q], laughed also, and she said: Time shall show. Listen, King. This

[p] It is a very bad omen, in India, for a vulture to settle on a house.

[q] A female vulture. I retain the original word, because it seems to be peculiarly expressive of the thing.

is Kírttisena, a nephew of Wásuki, King of the Snakes, and I am his only daughter. For this form of vulture was assumed by us, only to converse with thee. Now he maintained thy daughter to be more beautiful than I am. Thereupon I vowed vengeance. But I agreed to leave her unmolested, if thou didst give her to him for a wife. So to preserve her from my vengeance, he asked her of thee in marriage. Now, then, since thou hast rejected his suit, despising him hastily for his outward form, and since my own beauty has been slighted by his comparison, ye two shall be punished, she for her beauty, and thou for thy insolence, and through the means of that very beauty, on account of which my father and I have become contemptible. See, O thou who despisest a suitor, whether thou canst easily procure another. This shall be the condition of thy daughter's marriage. Whatever suitor shall lay claim to her, thou shalt send up to this terrace alone at night. And if he claims, and does not come, we will swallow thy city whole, houses and all. Then those two vultures disappeared. And not long afterwards, hearing that my daughter was to be given in marriage, suitors arrived like swarms of bees from every quarter of the world,

attracted by her fame. For she is called Yashowatí, because the fame of her fills the world. Then all those suitórs followed one another, like the days of the year in which they went, up upon the terrace of the city wall: and like those days, not one of them all has ever returned, but they have vanished utterly, none knows how, or where. And when all the distant suitors were exhausted, and all the neighbouring kings, then, in my ardent desire to get her married, no matter how, to no matter whom, I offered her to the men of my own city, showing her to them from the palace windows. And every man that saw her ran to win her; and one by one, the men of the city followed after her former suitors, till they grew few in the city. Thereupon the women banded together, and took their husbands and their sons and everything in the shape of a man, and hid them: and now as thou seest, there is not a man to be seen or found, in the whole city. But every stranger that comes to the city, they catch, and bring him straight to me, as they have done in thy case also. And the mere sight of my daughter always makes him not only willing, but, as thou art, even eager, to marry her at any cost. And yet they have all utterly vanished,

like stones, dropped, one after another, into a well without a floor. And there is my daughter, maiden and unmarried still. And I can see my ancestors, wringing their hands for grief: knowing well, that as soon as I myself am dead, it is all over with their race. For who will offer them water, since the fatal beauty of my only daughter has set a term to my ancient line?

So as Aja stood, lost in wonder at the old King's story, his daughter suddenly rose to her feet with a shrill cry. And she exclaimed: O son of a King, fly quickly! Hence! away! back with thee even into the desert, and leave me and my father and this miserable city to our inevitable fate. And she sank down in a swoon, and would have fallen to the ground, but that Aja sprang quickly forward and caught her as she fell.

So as he stood, holding her in his arms, and wishing that her swoon might last for ever, so only that he held her, for she stole away his senses with the seduction of her fragrance and proximity, her father exclaimed, in dismay: Ha! this is something new, and a thing that has never occurred before. And what can be the matter now? O son of a King! she must have fallen in love with thee, as

well indeed she might, for thy beauty and thy youth. And doubtless it has grieved her soul, to think of thy approaching end. But alas! alas! this is worse than all. For now, if thou fallest a victim, as cannot fail to be the case, like all thy predecessors, she will herself not survive thee: and then, indeed, there is an end of all. For as long as she was left to be married, there was still a shadow of hope behind.

And he began to ramble about, wringing his hands for grief. But Aja said to himself, with joy: Ha! this was all I wanted, if only it be true. And he said to the King: O King, it will be time enough to afflict thyself for her death or for mine, when we have actually died. But count me, in the meantime, as thy son-in-law: and be under no anxiety as to the fate of thy ancestors. For I will guarantee their good condition: and this very night, I will rid thee of the evil demon that molests her. And to-morrow, I will take this hand, and lead her round the fire[r].

And he took her hand, as she lay in his arms, and touched it with his lips.

[r] That is, marry her.

V.

AND instantly, as though his kiss had been to her like sandal and like palm-leaf fans, she came back to herself. And when she saw who held her, she started up, and stood, blushing the colour of her own lips, with eyes cast upon the ground. And the King said: O daughter, what is this? Does it become a high caste maiden outwardly to exhibit her inward feelings, and abandon the straight line of virgin modesty by behaviour that betrays her heart?

And then, Yashowatí sighed deeply. And she looked for a while in silence, first at her father, and then at Aja: and all at once, she stood erect, like one seized by sudden resolution, and she clapped her hands together, and exclaimed, in a voice that shook and quivered with emotion: Ha! who can hide a forest fire by covering it over with a little straw, or what does maiden conduct matter, in the ruin of the three worlds! Aye! the fire of grief consumed me, to see this noble son of a king, and to think that he escaped the desert only to meet his death from me. Now has my punishment come upon me in the form of this tall and splendid youth. For I grieved for the fate of my former suitors, and yet I saw them

for all that go, one by one, to their useless doom, and still myself remained alive. Long ago, beyond a doubt, I ought myself to have left the body, and perished of my own accord, rather than consent to live, the cause of death to so many others: and by putting myself to death, I should have cut in two the fatal chain of their succession, and saved their lives by the substitute of my own. And now, instead, I have been as it were their murderess, and a death to them all in female form. And now the Deity has avenged them, by sending to me at last the God of Love in human shape, whose death will be a grief to me a hundred fold more awful than any death I could have died. And I myself shall not survive him. Then why waste time in chiding one who has but one more day to live? For as soon as night arrives, he must go like the rest to meet his doom: and certain it is, that I shall not live to see the sun rise again without him.

And as she spoke, they gazed at her, astonished. For she seemed like one that has burst the bonds of all restraint, and thrown all consideration to the eight quarters of the world. But as soon as she stopped, the old King uttered a doleful cry. And he exclaimed: Yashowatí, O daughter, what words

are these? Is it any fault of thine that thou art beautiful? And wilt thou talk of abandoning the body? Then what will become of the family, of which thou art the only hope? But Aja laughed: and he said: O lovely lady, waste not thy grief on such a thing as I am: and O father-in-law, cease from bewailing calamities that are only the shadows of thy own fears cast upon the dark curtain of the future. For many are they that are doomed to die, yet never perish after all. And I have not escaped the sand, to perish lightly in any other way. Be assured that the lamp of thy race is burning still with a steady flame, not to be extinguished by a little puff of wind. To-morrow we will laugh together over these idle apprehensions, which the rising sun will dissipate together with the mists of night.

But Yashowatí turned, and looked at him with steady eyes. And she said: My husband, for such indeed thou art, the first that I have ever chosen[s], and the last that shall ever claim my hand: dost thou think that I would have so far forgotten the reserve that is becoming to a maiden of my caste, as to offer myself like an *abhisárikâ*, but that I know, as

[s] This was the privilege of kings' daughters.

thou canst not know it, the absolute and utterly inevitable certainty of thy doom, and that this is the very last day we shall spend together, though it is also the very first? And Aja looked at her with affection: and he laughed again. And he said: Sweet wife, since thou art so very certain, then as it must be, let it be. What care I for to-morrow, if I am with thee all to-day? Know, that but an hour ago, when first I saw thee, I would have given my life, doubly dear as it was by reason of its recent escape from death, to win from thee a little love, even a very little. But as it is, a single day is life enough, provided it is spent with thee, even though I were really destined never to see another.

And she looked at him with wistful eyes; and after a while, she said: Thou art brave, and as I would have had thee. And thou dost not believe me: and it may be, it is better so. And then she turned to the King, and said: O father, go away now: and leave me alone with my husband. And be not afraid, either for thy honour or my own, for there shall be as it were a sword between us. But I wish to have him all to myself, until the end. And when the time has come, let the gong be sounded, and I will send him out to thee, and thou canst show him

the way to death. And thereupon the old King went away as she desired, moaning and muttering, and wringing his hands with grief.

So when he was gone, those two lovers sat together all day long, gazing at each other like the sunflower and the sun. And he utterly forgot the morrow, but it never left her mind, even for a single instant. And she made him relate to her his whole life from the very beginning, drinking in his words, and hanging on his lips, and watching him keenly, with eyes that never left his face, holding all the while his hand, with the grasp of one who knows that her husband must be led to execution in the evening. And she said to herself, at every moment: Still he is here: still he is here. And when the sun set, she sent for food and delicacies and wine, and fed him like a child with her own hand, tasting herself nothing And she surfeited him with the honey of her sweetness and the syrup of her kisses and the nectar of the young new moon of beauty bathed in the sun of love, the redder[t] because of its approaching set. And all at once, she started to her feet, in the very middle of a caress. And she stood, listening.

[t] A play on words: meaning also *more affectionate.*

And Aja listened also: and he heard in the silence the sound of a gong.

So as he watched her, she turned paler and ever paler, like the east at the break of dawn. And she put her two hands together, and pressed them tight against her heart, and then against her brow. And all at once, she came quickly to him, and said in a low voice: It is time. And she took his head in her hands, and kissed him, with lips that were cold as ice, and yet hot as fire, first on the eyes, and then on the mouth, and last of all upon the brow. And then she took his hand, and held it for a little while, with a clutch that almost hurt him, gazing at him with thirsty eyes. And suddenly, she threw away his hand, and pushed him away roughly, saying: Go. But Aja caught her in his arms, and kissed her yet again, as it were against her will. And he said: O fearful heart, be not afraid. Very soon, I will return. And he went away quickly, but at the door he turned, and saw her standing still, watching him with dry bright eyes, and lips that were shut tight. And at that very moment, the old King took him by the arm, and said: Come now, and I will show thee the way by which all thy predecessors went before thee.

Then Aja said: O King, I am unarmed. Give me a weapon to carry with me. So the King took him into the armoury, and he chose for himself a sword almost as long as he was tall. But he threw away the scabbard, saying: This would only be in the way: and now, I am prepared. And then the King led him away, and up a winding stair.

And when they were at the top, he stopped. And he said: O son-in-law that might have been, now fare thee well. And even I feel it harder to part with thee than with any of thy predecessors. Thou wouldst have made an altogether appropriate husband for my daughter, and O! that thou couldst have seen her dance, before thus disappearing: but now it is too late, for I doubt whether Tumburu himself could make her dance to-night, so troubled did she seem to be at bidding thee good bye. Go out, now, through yonder door: and thou wilt be more fortunate than all the others, if thou canst manage to return through it.

Then he went back into the palace. But Aja passed through the door, and found himself on the city wall.

A Total Eclipse.

तन्मत्कृते विस्मर जन्मभूमिम् द्वीपम् भजास्तंगतरागपात्रम

Then kith and kin and home forget, and all,
To sail beyond the setting sun, with me,
Where dead love's dreamy recollections call
Across the sea.

A Total Eclipse.

I.

AND he stood on the edge of the city wall, with his naked sword in his hand. And he looked on this side and on that, and saw the turrets of the city jutting out along the wall, like the huge black heads of elephants of war advancing in a line. And behind him lay the city, covered over with a pall of black that was edged and touched with silver points and fringes; and before him the desert stretched away, smeared as it were with ashes, under the light of the moon. And brave as he was, his heart beat, just a very little, in expectation of what was coming. And he said to himself: My father-in-law's dismissal was not very reassuring. But where then is the danger, and from what quarter is it coming, and what form will it take? For here is nothing whatever to fight with, except the shadows cast by the moon. Or is this all merely a trick of the King to test me, before

which all my predecessors have ignominiously failed? Yet no. For were it so, my wife would indeed be an actress[a] capable of reducing Tumburu to the state of ashes.

So as he stood, waiting, and smiling at his own thoughts, it happened that that daughter of Kirttisena, whose jealousy of the King's daughter had caused all the trouble in the King's city, came according to her custom flying towards the city wall. For every night she came to see whether there was a new suitor. And whenever she discovered one, she had recourse to a Rákshasa that was bound to her by obligations, who came as soon as thought of, and swallowed that unhappy suitor whole[b]. And now for some time, no new suitor had appeared. So as she came flying in the likeness of a bat, she looked towards the city wall, expecting to find it empty. And she saw, instead, Aja, standing, leaning on his sword, and smiling, on the very edge of the wall. And at the

[a] An actress and a dancer are in Sanskrit denoted by the same word.

[b] This method of disposing of objectionable suitors is unfortunately not available in Europe. A great swallowing capacity is a feature of the species Rákshasa. The "coming as soon as thought of" (*dhyátágata*) is the Indian equivalent of "rubbing the lamp" in the Arabian Nights.

very first glance at him, she was struck with stupor, and she fell that very moment so violently in love with him [c] that she could hardly flap her wings, by reason of the fierce agitation of her heart. So she alighted on the wall, a little distance off, and remained watching him, hardly able to breathe for emotion, in her own form [d], but surrounding herself with a veil of invisibility to escape his observation. And after a while, she drew a long breath, and murmured to herself: Ha! this is a suitor indeed, very different from all the others; and rather than a mere mortal man, he resembles the son of Dewakí [e], with Rádhá caressing him in the form of the moonlight that seems to cling affectionately to his glorious limbs. Ha! he looks like the tutelary deity of the city come to defy me, bringing the god of love to his aid in the form of his own marvellous and incomparable beauty.

[c] *Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?* Every Oriental would side with Shakspeare in this matter: love, in the East, is not love, unless it comes like a flash of lightning.

[d] This might be either that of a woman or a snake, for the Nágas, to whom she belonged, waver between the two. The Nágas, it may be well to remind the reader, is a being possessed of magic powers, especially that of *glamour* or *blearing the eye*, which appealed so powerfully to Spenser and Sir Walter Scott.

[e] Krishna, whose colour, it is to be noted, is blue.

Aye! and I feel that I am defeated already, before the battle has so much as begun. And then, all at once, a spasm of rage shot through her heart, and she turned pale. And she exclaimed: Ah! but I am anticipated by this accursed King's daughter, who will rob me of him, nay, has already done it, by her undeniable hateful beauty, and her priority of claim. Alas! alas! O why did I not see him first, before her abominable loveliness had made an impression on his heart? For he is very young, and it must be, open to the spell of beauty, and artless, and sincere. Ha! And suddenly, she started up, as if an idea had rushed into her mind. And she stood for a moment, thinking. And then she exclaimed, with a gesture of resolution: Yes, I also am beautiful. Now, then, I will efface her image from his heart, and replace it by my own. Now I will assault him, by all the power of my charms[f], and we will see whether he will be proof against the glamour of a beauty such as mine, multiplied and magnified by magic sorcery and fierce determination. Aye! I will move heaven and earth to steal his heart from the King's daughter,

[f] In every sense of the word: *mohavidlamsiyá* is stronger than any English equivalent.

and turn Pátála [g] upside down, to make him mine instead of hers. But if I fail? And again she turned deadly pale. And after a while, a bitter smile curled over her lips. And she said: If, if I fail; no, but I will not fail. But if I fail, then, I will take another way.

II.

So as Aja stood upon the wall, looking out over the desert, suddenly all vanished from before his eyes. And he saw before him no city, and no desert. But he found himself in a dusky wood, thick with tall *tamála* [h] trees, and lit by a light that was neither that of the sun nor that of the moon. And all around him huge red poppies waved gently without a wind, mixed with great moon-lotuses, whose perfume went and came by turns as it hung on the heavy air. And under the shadow of the black leaved trees large bats flew here and there with slow and noiseless flap, and on the branches monstrous owls with topaz eyes

[g] The Underworld, the home of the snakes.

[h] A tree with very black bark and white blossoms, dear to erotic poets, such as e.g. Jayadewa.

like wheels of flame sat motionless, as if to watch. And a dead silence like that of space whence all three worlds have been removed left Aja nothing else to hear but the beat of his own heart. And the hair rose up upon his head with sheer amazement. And he said to himself: Ha! what new wonder is this, and what has become of the city wall? And where in the world have I got to now, and how? Now let me be very wary, for the danger is evidently coming near.

And as he stood, grasping his sword, prepared, and looking quickly right and left, suddenly he saw a thing which rivetted his gaze to it, as if with an iron nail.

A little way off, among the poppies, was standing up like a lonely column all that was left of one of the walls of a ruined temple, whose fallen pillars were lying scattered all around it, half concealed by creeping leaves. And as he gazed intently at this upright fragment of a fallen wall, he saw upon it the image of a sculptured woman, which stood out so distinctly that he could not take his eyes from it. And after a while, he said to himself: Surely that can be no stone statue, but a real woman of flesh and blood, actually leaning, who knows why, against that bit of

a broken wall. And he looked and looked, and after a while, filled with irresistible curiosity, he went nearer, but very slowly, and as it were on his guard, to see.

So as he gazed, wonder and admiration gradually crept into his soul, and stole his recollection unaware. And he became wholly intent on the stone image, and forgetful of his situation. And he ceased to wonder at finding himself in the wood, so great was his new wonder at the beauty of the woman on the wall. And he said to himself: Surely he was a master artist, whoever he was, that made this woman out of stone, if stone indeed she be. For even now, near as I am, I can hardly believe she is made of stone.

And the more he looked, the more he marvelled. For she seemed in his eyes like a frozen mass of lunar camphor, moulded into a female form, standing cold and pure and still, alone by herself in that strange half light, that hovered as it were irresolute between the natures of night and day. And she stood with her right hand on her hip, which jutted out to receive it like the curve of a breaking wave: and her bare right breast stood out and shone like a great moonlit sea pearl, while the other was hiding behind the curling fold of the pale green garment

that ran around her, embracing her with clinging clasp like a winding wisp of emerald foam fondly wrapping the yielding waist of Wishnu's sea-born wife. And she was very tall, and shaped liked Shrî, and she stood with her head a little bent, and her sightless eyes fixed as it were on empty space, just as though she were listening for some expected sound. And as he continued to gaze at her, a wonder that was almost horror crept into his mind. For her face was not like that of an image, but rather resembled a mask, or the face of a very beautiful woman, that very moment dead. For the colour seemed as it were to have only just faded from her cheek, and the blood seemed only just before to have left her pallid lips, and the sight was as it were hanging yet in her great long open eyes, that were fixed on the distant sky. And he stood, gazing, as if the very sight of her had made of him another image like herself.

And then, at last, he stepped forward. And he put out his left hand, and touched her with his forefinger on the shoulder that was bare.

And instantly, as if his touch had filled her with a flood of life, a shiver ran like quicksilver over her stony limbs. And as he started back, to watch, the colour

came back into her face, and red blood rushed into her lips, and deep blue suddenly filled her eyes. And the tresses of hair around her head turned all of a sudden a glossy black, that shone with a blue-green lustre, as if reflecting the grassy sheen of her winding robe. And her bosom lifted slowly, and fell again with a deep sigh. And all at once, she abruptly altered her position, and her eyes fell straight on Aja, standing just before her. And she lifted up, first one eyebrow, and then the other, till they formed a perfect bow, for they joined each other in the middle. And she uttered a faint cry, as if in joy, exclaiming: Ha! can it be, and is it thou? Or am I dreaming still?

III.

AND Aja stood, staring at her with stony gaze, like a mirror of her own surprise. And he said to himself: Surely it is not she, but I myself, that am the dreamer. For here since the sun rose last, I have escaped the desert, and found this city without a man, and acquired a bride of peerless beauty: and now here is another, rising as it were from the dead, and seeming to expect me. And he

continued standing silent, gazing at her, sword in hand. And after a while, she said: What! is my form,' then, so frightful as to rob thee of thy tongue? Or art thou going to use that sword against me? Speak: but in the meanwhile, let me see, whether I have lost the use of my limbs, as thou hast that of thy tongue, after so long a sleep. And she leaped from her little pedestal, and moved a little way here and there, waving her beautiful arms about: and after a while, she came back, and sat down just before him, on one of the fallen pillars that were lying about the ground. And all the while Aja watched her, as if fascinated by a serpent, saying within himself: She moves like nothing I ever saw, save a panther or a gliding snake[i]. And then, all at once, she again put up one eyebrow, and said to him with a smile: Must I, then, actually tell thee, that I am Natabhrukutí[k]? Then Aja said: O lady, it is obvious. For thy bent brow would plant arrows even in the heart of the Great Ascetic. And she said again: O

[i] It is a wonderful thing to see a cobra move. Nothing can describe it.

[k] That is, *the Beauty of the arched eyebrows.* (Pronounce *Nat-* to rhyme with *but.*)

husband, is this thy welcome, after so long a separation?

And Aja bounded, as if bitten by a snake. And he exclaimed: Thy husband! What! Am I then thy husband also? Does thy whole sex want to get me for a husband? But O thou beauty of bending brows, how can he be thy husband, that never saw thee in his life before? And only this morning, I was still wifeless, and a day has not elapsed, since I became another's husband. And he stopped short, again confounded at the effect of his own words. For hardly had they passed his lips, when Natabhrukutí started up, swelling with rage and convulsed with fury, with eyes that blazed like fiery stars. And she exclaimed: Never! never! Never shall she possess thee, nor any other than I myself. And then, like a flash of lightning, her rage vanished as quickly as it came. And she looked at him with imploring eyes, and said: Slay me now, with thy long bright sword, and send me back to that nonentity out of which thou hast just recalled me: but speak not of another woman in front of me. Alas! and am I all forgotten? And tears rolled from her great blue eyes, and fell like suppliants at her feet.

And Aja put up his left hand, and tugged at his hair in the extremity of his amazement. And he said: O thou strange offended lady, I am utterly bewildered, and resemble one that has lost his way at midnight in a wood. And thy anger and thy grief are alike altogether incomprehensible. How can I possibly have forgotten one, whom as I just now told thee, I never saw in my life before? Then she said: Nay, not in this life, but the last. For I was the wife of thy former birth.

Then Aja laughed, and he said: O beauty, who remembers his former birth? For like every other man, and like my ancestor the sun, I have risen up into light out of the sea of dark oblivion, into which I must sink again at last. And then she looked at him with a deep sigh. And she said: Alas! This is a punishment indeed, and worse by far than all the rest, if after having endured so long the state of a stone upon a wall, I am again become a woman, only to find myself repudiated and all forgotten, by him, on whose account I suffered all. Listen, then, and I will tell thee the story of thy former birth. It may be, that, in the hearing, some scattered reminiscences will be as it were awakened, to stir again in the dark lethargy of thy sleeping soul.

IV.

AND then she began to speak. And as she spoke, she leaned forward, as she sat upon the fallen pillar, and fastened her great eager eyes like magnets on his own. And as Aja watched them, they played as it were upon his heart. For their colour wavered and changed and faltered, shifting ever from hue to hue, turning golden and ruddy amber, and emerald-green and lotus-blue; and over her eyes her arching brows lifted and fell and played and flickered, fixing his troubled soul like nails, and rivetting his attention, till her singing voice sounded in his head like a distant tune crooned in the ear of a sleepy man. And she waved slowly her long round arms, all the while she spoke. And she said: Far away, over the sea, lies thy own forgotten land, and presently I will tell thee, and even show thee, where it is. And there it was, in our former birth, that thou and I were boy and girl. But thou wert the son of a mighty King, and I was only a Brahmani, a poor man's daughter, and my father was an old ascetic, far below thee in everything else, but caste. And I lived alone with my old father, in the very heart of a great forest, in a little hut

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of bark, over which the *málati* creeper grew so thick, that nothing was visible of that little hut, except its door. And then one day I was seen by thee, standing still in that very door, with my pitcher on my head: as thou wert passing through the wood to hunt upon thy horse. And that moment was like a sponge, that blotted from the mind of each everything but the other's image. And I made of thee my deity, and forgot everything in the three great worlds, for thee alone. And thou, that day, didst clean forget thy hunting: or rather, the God of Love showed thee game of another kind [1], and from pursuing thou didst fall to wooing a quarry that wished for nothing so much as to be thy prey. And we married each other that very day, which ah! thou hast all forgotten. What! dost thou not remember how I used to meet thee every day in the little hut, when my father was away in the wood engaged in meditation? What! hast thou really all forgotten how it was thy supreme delight to bring me garments and costly jewels, which I put on for thy amusement, thy forest-queen of the little hut? Has thy memory

[1] In Sanskrit, hunting and wooing can be mixed up together by plays on words.

cast away every vestige of reminiscence of thy old sweet love in the little hut? So then it happened that on a day we were together, blind and drunk with each other's presence, shut within the little hut like a pair of bees in a nectared lotus. And I was standing like an idol, dressed like the queen of a *chakrawarti*[m], loaded with gold on wrists and feet, with great pearls wound about my neck: and thou wert contemplating me, thy creature[n], with intoxication, and hard indeed it was to tell, which of us two was the idol, and which was the devotee. And as we woke up from a kiss that lasted like infinity, lo! my father stood before us. And he said slowly: Abandoned daughter, that hast forgot thy duty in thy passion for this King's son, become what thou hast represented, an idol[o] of stone on the wall of a ruined temple far away: and thou, her guilty lover, fall again

[m] An emperor. Hindoo idols are dressed and undressed, like dolls, by their officiating priests.

[n] She means, he was her Creator.

[o] The Hindoos have no word, because they have not the idea, of an *idol*. They call it a *god* or an *image*. Our word *idol* implies the antagonism to paganism involved in Christianity, and no two books are more alike than S. Augustine's *City of God* and Ward's *Hindoo Mythology*.

into another birth, and be separated from thy guilty love. Then being besought by us, to fix some period to the curse, he said again: When ye two shall meet again, and thy husband in his curiosity shall touch thee with his finger, she shall regain her woman's state, and be as she was before. And now all this has come about, exactly as he said. And I have found thee once again, only to find alas! alas! that thou has left thy heart behind thee in that old delicious birth.

V.

So as he listened, Aja's soul was filled as it were with a mingled essence of wonder and irresolution and sheeny beauty and singing sound. For the tone of her voice was like a lute, and before his eyes hovered a picture of waving arms and witching curves, out of which her dreamy eyes, from which he could not take his own, seemed as it were to speak to him of love reproachful and old regret. And all at once, with a violent effort, he roused himself as if from sleep with open eyes. And he shifted his sword to the other hand, and passed

his right across his brow. And he said, in some confusion: O thou strange and sweet-tongued woman, certain this much is, that I am filled by thee with emotion that I do not understand. And yet I know not what to think, or even say. For even apart from the promptings of a former birth, thy beauty and thy haunting voice, which I seem as it were to have heard before, are quite sufficient to rouse emotion even in a stone, much more in a man of flesh and blood.

Then she shook her head sadly, looking at him with glistening eyes; and she said, with a smile of ineffable sweetness: Ah! this is as I thought, and the instinct of thy former birth is clouded over and effaced, by thy meeting with this other woman in the morning of this very day. Alas! how small, how very small, the interval of space and time that divides the paradise of joy from the dungeon of despair! For had this our reunion been sooner by only a single day, I should have caught thy heart before it had been occupied by this all too fortunate other woman, who now holds it like a fortress, garrisoned by a prior claim. But what is this priority of claim? Can she, who by thy own confession has known thee only a single day, dare

to dispute priority with the darling of thy former birth[p]? Wilt thou break thy faith with me, to keep thy faith with her? Aye! and wilt thou, áfter all, gain so much by the exchange? Is she beautiful, then, this other woman? But I am beautiful, too? And she stood up, and looked at Aja with her head thrown back and proud eyes, as though to challenge his condemnation of her own consummate beauty. And she said again: Is she, then, this other beauty, either more faithful or more beautiful than I am? Speak, and tell me if thou canst, in what I am inferior, or why I am to be despised, in comparison with her.

And Aja looked at her again, and felt abashed, and half ashamed, he knew not why. And he murmured to himself: She does not lie: for beautiful she is indeed, and need not fear comparison with any woman in the world. And it may be, she is partly right, and if I had met her yesterday, before my heart was full, she would

[p] Though, in Europe, this insidious appeal might lack force, it is otherwise in India: whose millions doubt their former birth no more than they doubt their own existence. It is not long since a woman in Cutch burned herself with her own dead son, because, she averred, he had been her husband in her former birth.

have had little difficulty in entering in and capturing it, almost without resistance. And he stood looking at her silently, uncertain what to say or do, and half inclined to pity her, and half afraid of her and of himself, admiring her against his will, and as it were confessing by his very silence the power of her appeal. For notwithstanding the preoccupation of his heart, his youth and his sex became as it were allies with her against his resolution, compelling him to acknowledge the supremacy of the cunning god, and the spell of feminine attraction incarnate in her form.

And she stood there before him, for a little, with beauty as it were heightened by resentful reproach of the slighting of itself, and the disregard of its tried affection. And then all at once she sank down upon the ground, as if she were tired, and remained sitting among the poppies, with her chin resting on her left knee, which she embraced with her arms, watching him, and as it were, waiting with humility and patience for a decision in her case. And every now and then, she closed her eyes, and opened them again, as if to make sure that he was there.

And Aja looked round in the silence, at the poppies and the lotuses, and the great owls that

seemed to watch him, and back again at her. And his head began to whirl, and he muttered to himself: Is this a dream, and what does it all mean? And is she returning to the condition of an image, disgusted by my coldness and disdain? And what is to be done? And he looked at her face, deprived, by the closing of their lids, of the moon of her eyes, and resting like a mask upon its chin. And he said within himself: Her eyebrows move, as if they were alive. And he felt as it were unable to look away from them: and at last, annoyed with himself, he closed his eyes also, as though to escape their persecution.

VI.

AND then, he said to himself: This is cowardice, and after all, no refuge; for I seem to see her still, through the shutters of my lids. And he opened his eyes once more. And instantly, he leaped from the ground like a wounded stag, with a cry. For the wood, with all its lotuses and poppies, was gone. And in its place, he saw before him a forest with its great green trees all lit by the shining of the sun. And

just in front of him there stood a little hut, buried in the blossom of the *málatí* creeper. And in its doorway was standing a young Brahman woman, with a pitcher on her head. And she beckoned to him with a smile, and he looked, and lo! it was Natabhrúkutí. Then moved as if against his will, on feet that carried him towards her as it were of their own accord, he approached her. And as he drew nearer, there came from that creeper a wave of perfume, resembling that of jasmine, but sweeter, and so pungent that it entered like fire into his soul. And then she lifted the pitcher from her head, and set it down upon the ground, and caught him by the hand, and drew him within the hut. And there she cast herself into his arms, whispering in his ear, very low, so as to caress it as she spoke with her lips: My father is away, and now we are alone, and the day is all before us. Come now, what shall I do for thy delight? And she ran and shut the door; and then, taking from a chest rich clothes and splendid jewels, she began to put them on, saying as she did so: See! am I becoming more fit to be thy queen? And he watched her, stupefied, like one in a dream, and all the while she bathed him with intoxicating side glances shot like arrows from the bow of her arching brows. And

at last, she came slowly towards him, walking on tip-toe, and attitudinising, placing herself exactly in the posture in which he had seen her first among the poppies on the wall, with one hand on her hip. And she said, lifting her brow, with a smile that stole his reason: Now, then, the idol is ready for the devotee. And at that moment the door opened, and an old Brahman entered through it. And he said slowly: Abandoned daughter, that hast forgot thy duty in thy passion for this King's son, become what thou hast represented, an idol of stone on the wall of a ruined temple far away; and thou her guilty lover, fall into another birth, and be separated from thy guilty love.

And then, Aja heard no more. The world whirled around him; the blackness of night closed over his soul; he uttered a terrible cry, and fell to the ground in a swoon.

VII.

AND when he came to himself, he was back again among the poppies in the *tamála* wood. And he was lying on the ground, with Natabhrúkutí bending over him, holding him by the hand, with anxiety in her

eyes. And instantly he started up, and seizing his sword, stood gazing at her with stupefaction. And he said to himself: Am I dead or dreaming? And what does it all mean? Is it a delusion of the Creator, or a mirage and a madness of the desert, out of which I have never yet escaped at all? Aye! beyond a doubt, I am wandering still in the waste of sand, raving mad, and dying, and haunted by phantoms that are the premonitors of approaching death.

So as he stood, balanced in the swing of perplexity, and doubting his own reason, Natabhrúkutí looked at him fixedly, with concern and affection and curiosity in her eyes. And she said: Surely thou art ill. And why then dost thou shrink from me, as though I were a thing of terror: I, who ask for nothing but to tend thee all my life? For it was but now, as we spoke together in this wood, I looked up and saw thee suddenly close thy eyes. And as I watched thee, wondering to see thee sleeping as it were erect, there burst from thy lips a fearful cry, and I had but time to catch thee falling, and let thee sink upon the ground. And I brought thee to thyself, by fanning thee, as well as I might, with this great leaf.

And she held it up before him, while he continued to gaze at her in silence. And as he did not

speak, she looked at him curiously, and muttered under her breath, as though speaking to herself, and not intending him to hear: Can he have suddenly recollected his former birth, and is this the reason why he is staring at me, as if wishing to compare me with a picture in his head? And as he still kept silence, presently she said aloud: Dear, thou art sick: and much in need of medicines, such as I alone can give thee. Why wilt thou not confide in me? For I am a cunning leech, and know the virtue of every herb and every vegetable drug better than Dhanwantari[p] himself. And I have made myself mistress of every species of the art of healing, and in particular, I have fed myself on perfumes, and on the essences of flowers, and all the scented odours of aromatic shrubs, till I have myself become as it were a very attar, incarnate in a woman's form. Dost thou doubt it, and think me to be boasting? then try me, and I will prove to thee my power by experiment, in any way thou wilt. I will soothe and shampoo[r] thee with a hand softer than a snowflake's fall and

[q] The physician of the gods, the Hindoo Æsculapius.

[r] The *Samwáhanam* is one of those old Hindoo medical resources which we have only recently been wise enough to copy.

cooler than the icy moon: or, if thou wilt, I will croon to thee old airs, and put thee to sleep like a tired child, resting thy head on this bosom which once was thy delight, with melodies that shall speak to thee of drowzy bees and moaning winds: or I will steal thy waking senses from thee and lure them into slumber as it were against thy will by snaring them with fragrances more luscious than that *párijáta* blossom, which Wishnu once trailed through the intoxicated world, to drive it into madness at the moment, and leave it filled with inconsolable regret when it was gone. See, take this, and smell it, and thou wilt be better even now.

And she held out towards him, in the lotus of her hand, a tiny flower, in colour like an atom of the concentrated essence of the sky. And as Aja looked at it, there came from it a stream of a sharp and biting scent, that rushed into his soul, coming laden as it were with reminiscence and suggestions of the past; so that he said to himself: Ha! of what does this remind me, and where is it that I smelled its almost intolerable sweet before? And suddenly, the little hut rushed into his mind, and he exclaimed: It is the very smell of the creeper on its roof. And instantly, a feeling of amazement that almost over-

came him, mingled with terror, crept like a shudder over his limbs, and his hair stood on end. And he looked at Natabhrúkutí, who was watching him intently, and said, hoarsely: Who art thou, thou strange beauty, and what dost thou want of me? And what is the meaning of these inexplicable mysteries, before which I feel as if my reason were deserting me, and I were about to faint again?

VIII.

THEN she laughed, and said: Fair boy, I am only that bitter-sweet[8], a woman: and I want no more than what every woman wants, the man she loves, and that is thou. Aye! dost thou ask me, who and what I am? Listen then, and I will tell thee. I am a bee, which not like other bees, roams roving to flower after flower, but confines itself exclusively to one. I am a breeze, which not like other breezes blows fickle and inconstant now hither and now thither, but is fixed and ever steady, coming straight from Malaya laden with the sandal

[8] *Wishámritam:* lit. poison-nectar.

of affection to lay it at thy feet. I am only the echo of a voice which is thyself, the shadow of a substance and the reflection of a sun. I am like the other half of the god that carries the moon upon his head, the twin, the duplicate and counterpart of a deity who is thou. I am Rati, rejoicing to find again the body of her husband, and thou art Love himself returned to life whom I have found. I am an essence of the ocean, but unlike it, I hold within my heart not many pearls, but only one, which is thyself. I am a wick, consuming in thy flame, and like the music of a lute, I am a thing wholly compounded of melodies and tones, whose mood and being are dependent on the player, who is thou. Art thou sad? then I am also: art thou joyous? so am I: my soul is tossed about, and hangs on thy smiling or thy sighing, as a criminal depends on the sentence of the judge. And like a crystal, I am colourless[t] without thee, but ready on the instant to assume every tinge of the colour of thyself. Cast thy eyes upon me, and thou shalt see as in a glass thy every mood painted on the surface of my face. Ah! dost thou ask me what I am? Alas! I am a target for the poisoned arrows

[t] Also means *without affection.*

which Love shoots at me in the form of thy beauty greater than his own. And I am like a bare and withered, leafless and frost-bitten tree, which has suddenly shot up into blossom at the coming of spring in thy form. But as for thee, why, O why dost thou regard me that live for only thee as if I were a deadly snake, and thou a startled deer? In vain, in vain, dost thou endeavour to repel me, for I will not be repelled. I will melt thy cold ice in thy despite, by the fire of my affection, and drown thee in its flood, and sweep thee away from the rocks of thy resistance till thou art lost for ever in its dark and pearly depths.

And as Aja stood, listening in confusion to her words, which poured from her like a torrent, suddenly she clapped her hands, and exclaimed, as he started again at her vehemence: Ha! shall I tell thee, thou wilful and reluctant boy, of what thou dost remind me, standing as it were aghast, and obstinately set against me, mute, and yet asking what I am? Know, that long ago there was a King, who had for wives a thousand queens. And it happened that one day, he went with his wives to ramble in the heart of a forest. So after sporting for a while, he grew tired, in the heat

of the day, and lay down and fell asleep. Then all his queens stole away and left him lying, and went roaming up and down, very strange creatures in that wild rough wood, looking like living flowers of every hue and kind, that had somehow or other got free from their roots, a body of deer-eyed decoys let loose by Love the Hunter, to lure into his toils every man that should behold them. So as they rambled here and there, they came suddenly on an old ascetic. And he was standing still, half buried in the hills of ants, themselves covered over by his long white hair, immersed in meditation. Then all those fair women went up and stood around him in a cluster of beautiful curiosity, wondering at the sight of him, and asking each other in amazement, what in the world he could possibly be. So as they crowded round him, that old ascetic emerged from his trance, and as thou art doing, stood silent and aghast, thinking, as perhaps thou dost thyself, that Indra must have sent him all the nymphs of heaven in a body, to lure him from the path of liberation. For, O, thou beautiful suspicious youth, what is there so terrible about me, as to cause thee to shrink from my approach? Know, that many would be glad to

be wooed as was that old ascetic, and as thou art now.

IX.

AND then, Aja strove to awake as it were from a dream. And he shook himself, as if to shake it off, and he said to himself: I feel that I am falling as it were a victim to the spell of this passionate and subtle beauty; and now, unless I stiffen and steel myself against her, I shall undoubtedly be bewitched and beguiled beyond the possibility of escape. And he summoned his resolution, and said, with a semblance of composure: Fair one, thou dost thyself no injustice in comparing thyself alone to a thousand queens: for thou art a very incarnation of all the bewildering fascination of thy sex. And yet, potent as they are, thy charms are wasted, and resemble blunted arrows when directed against me. For as I have already told thee, I am pledged to another, and proof against thy spell, as doubtless was thy old ascetic against that bevy of straying queens.

And then Natabhrúkutí smiled, and she shook at him her finger, as she answered: Rash boy, beware! Be not too sure of the adamantine quality of thy

resistance, nor even of thy wisdom in resisting me at all. And beware of provoking the indignation of slighted Love, who may make of thee a signal example of his vengeance. Take care, lest annoyed with thy obstinacy in rejecting what he offers thee for nothing, he should deprive thee even of that other beauty, on whose account alone it is that I am held by thee so cheap. Poor youth! but that my lips are tied, I could enlighten thee. Art thou, who art so ready lightly to disdain me, art thou, I say, so sure, so very sure, that thou art thyself the only lover of this much married beauty, whom thou sawest, as thou sayest, for the very first time in thy life to-day? Art thou so sure, so very sure, that she is not deceiving thee, and that thou art not merely the last of the many lovers whom she toys with for a moment, and then carelessly casts away? Art thou so very certain that thou hast never had a predecessor? And Aja started, in spite of himself. For the word recalled to him the manner of the old King. And Natabhrúkutí saw it. And she looked at him as it were with compassion, and said: Alas! unhappy boy: thou seest that in thy youth and inexperience such an idea had not occurred to thee. Little art thou qualified to cope with a woman's guile.

Then said Aja fiercely, in wrath both with himself and her: It is false, and she is true. But Natabhrú-kuṭí answered very gently: Be not angry, for I do not question that she loves thee. I do not even doubt it: for if she did not, she would be a fool. But listen, and learn, what thou dost not seem to know, that Love is a Master Knave; aye! by far the greatest master of deceit in the three great worlds. And woman is his aptest pupil, and every woman living, were she even as simple as thyself, becomes, as soon as she falls under the influence of Love, a very incarnation of policy and craft and wiles. I tell thee, foolish boy, that she that loves in earnest, were she good as gold, pure as snow, and flawless as a diamond, would plunge, to gain her object, to the very lowest bottom of the ocean of deceit. And what is her object but the esteem of her lover? Dost thou think, she would balance for an instant, between her lover, and the ruin of the world? between his good opinion, and a lie? Dost thou think, she would forfeit thy esteem, when to deceive thee would preserve it? I tell thee, in such a dilemma, she would lie, till the very sun at noon hid his face out of shame. Know[u], that long ago there lived at Wárá-

[u] In all Oriental stories, statements are proved not by Aristotelian

nasí[x] an independent lady, of beauty so extraordinary, that swarms of lovers used to buzz continually about her like great black bees about the mango blossom in the spring. But independent though she was, she was so fastidious, that none of her innumerable lovers ever touched her heart even for a moment. And hence she lived like a lamp at midnight surrounded by the corpses of her victims, who fluttered about her lustre and perished in its flame. And then at last, one day it came about that a tall young Rajpoot almost as beautiful as thou art arrived at Wáránasí. And Kasháyiní[y] (for that was her name) saw him from a window as he came into the city; and instantly like an empty pitcher suddenly plunged into the Ganges, she was filled to the very brim by the inrush of Love's sacred nectar. And she said to herself: The very first thing that he will hear of in the city is myself. And like everybody else, he will come immediately to see me: and that very

syllogism, but by "instances:" and we are reminded of the opinion of the artful Retz, that "*one never persuades anybody, but anybody can insinuate anything.*"

[x] Benáres. The lady in question was one of those Hindoo Aspasias of whom many similar stories are told.

[y] Which we might translate Aromatic: it includes the ideas of *red colour* and *pungent perfume.*

moment, I shall abandon the body out of shame. For though my beauty might attract him, yet he will be convinced that many lovers have preceded him, and therefore, at the bottom of his heart he will despise me. And this would be worse than any death. And yet without him, my birth will have been in vain. Therefore, I must devise some expedient. So after a while, she went out in disguise, and bought for a large sum of money the body of a woman of her own age and size who had died that very day. And bringing that body home secretly at night, she dressed it in her own clothes, and burned it till its identity was obliterated. And then she set fire to her house, and left it by a back door, and went away, abandoning all her wealth but the jewels that she wore, for the sake of her picture in the air.[z] And at that very moment, the Rajpoot came along, led by some of the townspeople to visit her, as it were set on fire by the very description of her beauty. And he looked and saw the flames bursting from her house, as though lit by himself. And they found the half burned body in the ashes, and immediately all the lovers of Kasháyiní followed her through the fire of grief to the other world. But the Rajpoot

[z] Or, as we say, castle in the air.

managed, in spite of disappointment, to remain alive. And she, in the meantime, having given everyone the slip, found a false ascetic, and bribed him with jewels, giving him instructions without letting him know who she was. So that ascetic went and struck up acquaintance with the Rajpoot, pretending to be a discoverer of treasure[a]. And he performed incantations, and, after a while, he said to him: Go quickly to Ujjayini, and dig in the north-east corner of the burning ground outside the city on the very last day of the dark half of the month of Magha, and thou shalt find a treasure. Take it, for what is the use of treasure to such a one as me. Thereupon that Rajpoot, having nothing else to do, went. And Kashâyiní, having first made sure that the bait had taken, went herself and got there before him. So when that Rajpoot arrived, he dug exactly as he was told, and found absolutely nothing. And cursing his destiny, he went out of the burning ground in the early morning: and as he went along, suddenly he saw Kasháyiní, who was waiting for him, sitting weeping by the wayside, under a great *ashwattha* tree: beautifully dressed, blazing with jewels, and adorned with saffron and antimony, betel, indigo, and

[a] A regular trade in medieval India.

spangles, flowers, minium, and henna, bangles on ancle and comb in her hair. And she said to that Rajpoot, who was as utterly astounded by the sight of her as if she had been water in the desert: O son of a king, succour one who is utterly without resource. And when he asked her, what was the matter, she said: I was the only wife of a very rich merchant, and as we travelled from the South, suddenly we were set upon by a band of Thags. And after killing every one but me[b], they all went to sleep, thinking me secure; but in the middle of the night, I went a little way, and hid myself in a hollow tree. And in the morning, those villains, after hunting for me in vain, all went away, fearing a pursuit, and I came out of the tree trembling, and reached this road, and now I am alone in the world. Then said the Rajpoot to himself: Ha! so, after all, I have found my treasure, and that excellent ascetic was a true prophet. And he said: O lady, I am of good family. And now, if thou wilt have me for a husband, I will supply the loss of thy merchant, and all the rest of thy relations. And she feigned reluc-

[b] Everything in this story is exactly in harmony with the manners of medieval India. The Thags often preserved a woman for her beauty, when they murdered every one else.

tance: but after a while, she dried her tears, and consented. But that Rajpoot almost went out of his mind, so great was his delight. And one day he told her of Wáránasí, and the burning of Kasháyiní. And she looked at him with laughing eyes, and said: O my husband, I will make up to thee for the loss of Kasháyiní: for I am just as beautiful as she.

X.

AND as Natabhrúkutí ended, she leaned forward, and gazed at Aja with soft seductive eyes, till he blushed, and wavered before her like the flame of a candle in a wind. For her beauty bewildered him, and her cunning story planted, as if against his will, the seed of suspicion in his mind. And in spite of himself, he said to himself: What if it were as she says, and my wife, like another Kasháyiní, were concealing from me something that she shrank from avowing, lest I should think the worse of her. And he turned pale at the thought, that any other lover should, even a very little, have occupied her heart before him. And he stood silent, and confused, striving to expel from his mind the doubt that

Natabhrúkutí had raised in it, saying to himself: Can I really be only the last of many lovers? And all the while, Natabhrúkutí watched him, devouring him as it were with her eyes. And at last, she said again: Sweet boy, thou art too young and too honest to cope with women, who were framed by the Creator to deceive. But Aja said angrily: Thou art thyself a woman, seeking at this very moment to deceive me: and as for thy age, it is less than my own. And she said: Nay, nay: I am older, for I am wiser than thyself. For when I see my husband, I remember him, but me thou hast utterly forgotten, thy true and only wife. Ah! foolish one, thou hast forgotten. And thou resemblest one, who casts away a costly jewel, for the sake of a bit of glass, shining only in the sunlight of thy ignorance, and trodden by the foot of every passing stranger. What! can I do nothing to rouse thy recollection? Look at me well! look hard, and it may be, something of me will touch as it were a chord in thy soul.

And she came up close to him, so that the warmth and fragrance of her beauty enveloped him like an atmosphere of intoxication. And she joined her hands, looking up into his face, as it were compelling his reluctant admiration by her

humble submission to his will. And she said: Hast thou, hast thou indeed forgotten all? And as he gazed at her, two huge drops of crystal welled into her eyes, and hung poised before they fell on the net of her long dark lashes. And she said: Thou sayest, I am seeking to deceive thee. I love thee, and where is the deception? Is it not rather thou that art the deceiver in this matter? Is it any fault of mine if another has stepped in to defraud me of thyself? Or am I to be blamed, if thy beauty still beguiles me as it did long ago? And yet, dost thou accuse me as if I were a criminal? O blue black bee, what is this behaviour, that thou seekest as it were to pick a quarrel with the poor red lotus who loves thee but too well? And she smiled through her tears, and exclaimed: Ah! but in spite of thee, I will adore thee, whether thou wilt or no. Ha! and I will compel thee to remember, and force my way through every barrier and obstacle till I reach the recollection[e] in the bottom of thy heart. O canst thou not remember the days of long ago, when my now despised beauty was a joy to thee, and my hair a very net to snare thy willing soul, and my

[e] The reader should remember that in Sanskrit, *love* and *recollection* are the same word.

eyes were more to thee than any diamonds, and these two arms were thy prison and thy chain, and this agitated bosom was thy pillow on which I lulled thee to slumber with the music of this very voice. Hast thou really forgotten the nectar of my kiss? hast thou actually forgotten thy own insatiable thirst? Ah! but if thou hast forgotten, I have not; and the innumerable multitudes of thy too delicious kisses come back to me, singing in my memory, and whispering in my soul like the lisping of the sea. Hark! Dost thou not hear them also, those voices of a former birth?

XI.

AND as Aja gazed at her, stunned and almost overcome by the pathos of her irresistible appeal, and as it were swept from his feet by the surge of her passion, suddenly she seized his left hand with her right, and stood, grasping it as if convulsively, with the other hand raised, and bending her head, as if to listen. And he listened, and lo! there sounded in his ears a murmur resembling that of the sea, mixed with faint strains of music, and echoes of indistinguishable singing voices coming

as it were from the ends of the earth. And a shudder ran through him, as she turned, and looked at him as if in ecstasy, with eyes that saw nothing, murmuring in an eager voice that chanted and charmed his ear like the rushing of a stream: Dost thou hear the voices, calling thee over to the other shore? For the sea is the sea of separation, and the other shore is our former birth. Far away over the setting sun hides the red land[d] of our old sweet love. And I can take thee back to it, out of this dim and dingy wood. Only I can carry thee back to the land beyond the sunset hill, where love is lying dead. Over the sea where monsters lurk, and great pearls grow in sunless deeps, I can carry thee back again to the land of long ago. Never a ship with a silken sail could rock thee over across the waves so well as I will waft thee there on the swell of this soft breast. Never a breeze from the sandal hill could ferry thee over a silent sea so gently as will I, by breathing into thy raptured ear tales of thy old forgotten past with fond and fragrant lips. What! art thou still oblivious of that old delicious birth? Dost thou

[d] The Sanskrit *dwîpa* has exactly the same connotation as our islands of the Blest, and like them it is placed in the setting sun.

never behold in dreams the paradise of our little hut, and slake again thy raging thirst in a long forbidden kiss? Does she never come back to thee, the Bráhmani girl with a face like mine, with lips that laughed and eyes that shone, and a mango flower in her hair? Say, dost thou never dream of her? And she shook his arm with frenzy, and exclaimed: Ha! wake from thy magic sleep, and tear away the curtain that hides me from thy blinded soul. I will, I will awake thee. I will not be forgotten. And all at once, she burst into a passion of tears. And she reeled, as though about to fall, and tottered, and threw herself, sobbing hard, against his breast.

And while she spoke, Aja stood, like one pushed to the very edge of a precipice, pale as death, and breathing hard, spellbound. And then at last, when she threw herself upon his breast, again a shudder ran through all his limbs. And as if her touch had shattered to pieces the last fragment of his resolution, he caught her around the waist with the one arm that was free. And with tears in his own eyes, he stammered, as if in the extremity of desperation, hardly knowing what he said: Alas! I have been harsh to thee. O lovely browed beauty,

cease to weep. Why, O why, did I not meet thee sooner by only a single day?

XII.

AND at that very moment, he heard behind him a deep sigh. And as he turned, wood, poppies, and all vanished from before his eyes. Once more he stood on the city wall; and there before him was the King's daughter. And she was standing in the doorway, through which he had come upon the wall, leaning against the open door, and paler than Love's own ashes, while her great dark eyes were frozen as it were to ice, and yet lit up by the triple fire of sorrow and reproach and fierce disdain. And she looked like the daughter of Janaka, when forsaken by the lord of the race of Raghu, and like the heavenly Urwashi, when abandoned by Pururawas, a very spirit of despair carved by the Creator into a stony female form, to break the heart of the three worlds. And as if the very sight of her had broken the spell that held him, reason and recollection suddenly returned to Aja, as it were at a single bound. And he

woke, as if from a magic sleep, and on the instant, a sword ran as it were straight into his heart. And with a cry, he flung away his sobbing burden like a blade of grass, not caring where it fell: and ran towards the King's daughter. But she, when she saw him coming, shrieked, and started, and exclaimed: Away! Touch me not, save with the point of thy sharp true sword, to pierce me through the body as thy perfidy has my soul.

Then Aja tossed away his sword, with a shudder, over the edge of the wall. And he seized himself by the head with both hands, with a groan like the roar of a wounded lion. And he exclaimed: Ha! Better now it had been indeed, had I never emerged from the waste of sand. And he turned fiercely upon Natabhrúkutí, saying: This is thy doing, thou vile enchantress: and now I am indeed awake.

But even as he spoke, the words died away upon his lips; and he stood still, like a picture on a wall, for wonder at what he saw before him. For Natabhrúkutí was standing still, exactly where he left her, bolt upright, like a spear fixed in the earth. And her beauty was greater than ever, and yet such, that as he saw it, his heart stopped in

his breast. For every vestige of the nectar of her love-emotion had left her, and in its place, the poison of immortal hate shone in her cold and evil eyes, which were fastened, as if with a mixture of pain and pleasure, with a glittering and fiendish stare, upon the King's daughter. And as he watched them, cold ran in Aja's veins. For her eyes shook, and changed colour, and a horrible smile played on her blue and twitching lips. And she looked thin, for her two arms hung down tight against her sides, and her fingers opened and shut, slowly, as if of their own accord.

And after a while, she spoke. And she turned to Aja, and said, in a voice that resembled a hiss: Fool! thou wouldst not take the blue flower I offered thee, though its fragrance could not have been matched by anything in the three worlds. Now, then, I will take another way. So as he watched her, she was gone: and he saw before him nothing but the empty city wall.

And as he looked again, not crediting the testimony of his own eyes, he heard a sharp cry from the King's daughter. And he turned, and saw Yashowatí sinking to the ground. And at that very moment Natabhrúkutí stood again before him.

And she looked at him with strange eyes, and said slowly: Go now, and enjoy thy wife. But I must give thee just one kiss, before I go.

And as Aja looked into her eyes, suddenly, like a flash of lightning, he understood. And he struck his hand upon his brow, exclaiming: Ha! Now, now, I understand, too late. Thou art that very she, that was jealous of the King's daughter's beauty, and ruined her out of spite. And I have been befooled by thee, and failed to stand the test. And he ground his teeth with rage, that swept through him like a storm. And he said to himself: Alas! I threw away my sword. No matter. Now, then, as she said herself, I will take another way.

And he looked at her, as she stood waiting. And he held out his arms, saying: Come, then. And as she put her face close to his own, he caught her by her slender throat, with both hands, in a grip like that of death.

And then lo! she was gone again. But in her place, he held in his grasp a huge yellow snake, which struck him, as he clutched it hard, once and twice, upon the lips.

A Fatal Kiss.

A Fatal Kiss.

AND then, little by little, the night gradually came to an end. And the sun rose up, out of his home in the eastern mountain, and began rapidly to climb into the sky.

And all at once, there arose a great hubbub, and an outcry in the King's palace. And the women ran hither and thither, wailing and screaming and crying out: Haha! haha! the daughter of the King is gone. And they hunted in all directions, but could not find her anywhere: and they went and told the King. But he, when he heard it, came running just as he was in his night clothes, and hurried about with all the women, looking into every corner, and finding nothing. So after turning the palace upside down, he stopped short. And he said: What if she should have followed her lover up on to the city wall, and shared his fate! For beyond a doubt, like all his predecessors, he has vanished never to return.

Then they all went up the winding stair, the King going first. And he stepped out on to the wall. And instantly, with a piercing cry, he fell to the ground in a mortal swoon.

Then terror seized on all those women, and they stood exactly where they were, looking at each other with pale faces, not daring to advance. But at last, after a long while, supporting each the other, they pushed forward and looked out. And they saw the King's body, lying on that of his daughter; and a little further off, Aja, lying upon his face.

Then they went out, and took up those three bodies, and carried them in, and examined them. And after a while, they said: Doubtless the heart of the old King broke, when he saw his daughter lying dead. But as for the other two, one snake has evidently bitten both. And yet, this is a wonderful thing. For she has been bitten on the foot, but her lover upon the lips. What then? Was he trying to kiss the snake, that it should bite him upon the lips? For how could even the biggest snake reach up so high, as this great Rajpoot's mouth?

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